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221306Z May 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000728

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2015

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL BA

SUBJECT: MINISTER OF INFORMATION DEFENDS WEBSITE
REGISTRATION POLICY

REF: A. MANAMA 374 B. MANAMA 363

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (C) Minister of Information Dr. Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, during a May 17 discussion with the Ambassador, sought to explain and defend a recently-announced policy calling for the registration of all Bahrain internet sites with the Ministry of Information. He stressed the policy should not be looked at as a restriction of freedom of speech, but rather an attempt to establish guidelines for online content publishers, to steer people -- especially Bahrain's youth -- towards a higher and cleaner level of discourse, and to provide a legal avenue for individuals to prosecute defamation, indecency or libel. He said that people cannot be forced to register, and of course can easily open and operate websites from abroad. As far as he knew, he added, there was no law in place to take someone to court who failed to register. He passed a one-page paper giving background on the policy (see para 5).

2. (C) Asked why the Ministry of Information decided to implement this policy now, Abdul Ghaffar did not mention the recently-arrested website operators, who are currently awaiting court proceedings (reftels), but rather talked in more general terms about increasing numbers of Bahraini youths who, instead of using websites for "good discussions," were resorting to dirty and defamatory language against people, including women. "We thought that through registration," he said, "we might be able to show young people that they should be involved in a higher level of discussion." He added that Bahrain is in the process of building democracy and must be careful not to let people exploit freedom of expression to send the democratic process in a wrong direction.

3. (C) On May 3, approximately 100 people demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Information to protest the new policy. Ali Abdul Imam, a website administrator who is currently facing charges for the content of the website bahrainonline.org, told us that, in his view, the government's intention is to find out the names of website administrators in order to hold them responsible for anything posted on their sites. He noted that there are an estimated 20,000 Bahraini websites, and that the government could not possibly keep track of them all. He predicted that the policy would be applied selectively, and those whose websites have content critical of the government would be punished. International NGO Reporters without Borders criticized the policy, saying "this does not happen in any democratic country and is a threat to press freedom."

4. (C) Comment: We understand from Ministry of Information sources that the Minister himself had some misgivings about the policy. It remains to be seen how aggressively the Ministry pushes website operators to register, and how actively it uses the registration system to monitor and regulate website content. End comment.

5. (U) Following is the one-page paper entitled "Outline of Internet Website Registration Policy," which Abdul Ghaffar passed to the Ambassador:

"The Directorate of Press and Publications has instituted a policy calling for the registration of all Bahrain Internet sites with the Ministry of Information. The objective of the new policy measure is to integrate registration guidelines for online content publishers with those of traditional print and broadcast media. Audio, visual, print, software, and other multimedia developers and content distributors are already required by practice in Bahrain and globally to register with a respective designated body to protect the rights of content owners and regulate distribution in accordance with the laws of the state and international community. The new regulation will seek to extend this procedure as a matter of legal conformity to the new emerging presence of Internet content as a competing and alternate media outlet.

"The measure will ideally serve to bolster the standard and content of sites and serve as legal safety nets to content viewers, Internet users, and prevent the illegal or malicious use of the Internet under similar guidelines used to regulate

print and broadcast media. Specifically in mind, the new regulation will seek to complement Bahrain's commitment to protect against intellectual copyright infringement on ideas, writings, arts, and other content deemed requiring protection under international copyright obligations. The guidelines are designed to assist in the protection and development of e-commerce activities in Bahrain and geared towards preventing the establishment of Internet sites supporting fraudulent commercial activities, harming the natural environment, facilitating illegal financial transactions, or the sale of illegal goods and services as a confidence building measure to the business community, investors, and other societal interests in Bahrain and the region. Additionally, the regulation will seek to provide legal avenues for consumers, intellectuals, groups, non-government entities, and individuals to prosecute against defamation, public decency, and humanitarian ethics by holding content providers or publishers libel. This will be with specific regard to Internet media containing illegal pornography, pedophilia advocating ethnic, religious, or gender-based violence or hate crimes against certain communities, individuals, groups or minorities, or sites promoting terrorist activities, distributing information on explosives manufacturing or advocating assassinations.

"In summary, the new regulation will seek, as its proposed mandate, to serve as an innovative legal measure geared towards anticipating continued growth in Internet activities and services as well as expected long term needs to introduce legal safeguards to content publishers, consumers, and users. It will serve as an instrument to promote cooperation between the private sector, non-public sector, and Government to ensure the continued growth and development of web content in the public interest of safe and protected consumer, user, and developer activity. Through continued consultations with Internet service providers, international regulators, content providers, the business community, educational institutions, societies, and domestic users, the policy will be approached with the utmost sensitivity and discretion to prevent any unnecessary obstacles to the growth and development of Internet content while helping to protect the legal interests of the respective parties."

MONROE